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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the outcomes of a study that examined social skills as a contextual factor of African American male students with and without behavior problems. Forty-four African American male students (grades 3-5) reported three placement designations: mainstreamed with learning disabilities, mainstreamed with emotional disturbances, or general education students. The study included 22 general education teachers, participants who were homeroom teachers for special education, and a general education student participant in the mainstream classroom. Data were gathered through examiner interviews of student participants and teacher ratings of a minimum of two student participants (one special education student and one general education student). Results found no significant difference in teacher ratings of typical students and students with emotional disturbances in either social skills or problem behaviors. While there were significant differences in teacher ratings of social skills of typical students versus students with learning disabilities, no significant differences were found on problem behaviors. Additionally, there were no significant relationships when comparing teacher versus student ratings of social skills across groups. (Contains 23 references.) (CR)

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SOCIAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM BEHAVIORS AS CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION: STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

By

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SOCIAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM BEHAVIORS AS CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION: STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

Within the multicultural context of the educational experience, there is the culture of the teacher, the school and that which the student brings. It has been observed that where there is not a match between what the student brings and the expectations of that teacher within the context of the classroom, the child is met with constraints to educational opportunity (Comer, 1988). The importance of contextual factors has been displayed in special education referral and placement. The purpose of this study was to examine social skills as a contextual factor of African American male students with and without behavior problems.

Over the last several decades there has been a concern that African American students with disabilities are over represented in Special Education placement without these students meeting the criteria of a handicapping condition as defined by the law (Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Thurlow, 1992). This has been found to be particularly true of African Americans who are male and perceived to have a behavioral or discipline problem (Harry and Anderson, 1994). For example, in their analysis of national data, Harry and Anderson (1994) found that African American male

students' special education placement was well over 10% of their representation in the population. They were overrepresented as a whole (69%) and particularly in Learning Disabled (LD) (73%) and Emotionally Disturbed (ED) (76%). It is conceivable that teachers perceive minority students, particularly African American males, as being more aggressive and generally lacking acceptable characteristics, social skills, or behavior to be successful in student/teacher interactions (Willis, 1989). While there are a number of studies documenting the nature and impact of students' social skills, there has been little attention in the social skills research on specifically African American male students (Gresham and MacMillan, 1997).

The significance of social skills development in the educational system has long been recognized (Dusek, 1985; Gresham, et. al., 1987). It has been suggested that the behavioral characteristics of African American male students conflict with what is expected of students in school systems (Sigmon, 1990); however, few studies have focused on African American male students and special class placement. Deutsch (1967) noted 30 years ago that African American male children's aggressive behavior is more threatening than African American female children. More

recently, the behavior of African American male students has been observed and analyzed by Majors and Billson (1992). They provide a conceptualization of "cool posing" as a way to describe how behavior can be misinterpreted by those in authority. Specifically, Majors and Billson (1992) suggest that the "expressive" lifestyle displayed by African American males is threatening, considered aggressive and is intimidating. For these reasons, they assert, African American male children are suspended more frequently and for longer periods of time, and are more likely to be assigned to remedial courses and classes for the children who are retarded and learning disabled.

The relationship between the teacher and the student is important in the educational process. There is a need for and lack of research directly examining teacher perception of social skills and/or problem behaviors of identified disabled and general education non-disabled African American male students. The purpose of this study was to examine social skills as a contextual factor of African American male students with and without behavior problems.

Methodology and Analysis

Forty-four African American male students from third, fourth, and fifth grades were the student participants and they represented three placement designations mainstreamed learning disabled, mainstreamed emotionally disturbed or general education non-disabled. There were 22 general education teacher participants who were homeroom teachers for a special education and a general education student participant in the mainstream classroom. Data were gathered through examiner interviews of student participants and teacher ratings of a minimum of two of their student participants (one special education student and one general education student).

A series of t-tests ($p<.05$) and a correlation were calculated along with supplemental analyses to address the research questions. The social skills of African American male students with and without identified behavioral problems were explored by using a Quasi-experimental design. For the purposes of this study, social skills served as the dependent variable. This variable was

operationally defined by teacher and student ratings of social skills on the SSRS-T and SSRS-S instruments respectively. Correspondingly, student placement (mainstreamed LD, ED or general education) was the independent variable and defined by the student's actual school placement and diagnostic label. The research questions were:

1. Does the General Education teacher perception of students' social skills and problem behaviors differ for African American male students without a disability and those African American male students with emotional disturbances?

2. Does the General Education teacher perception of students' social skills and problem behaviors differ for African American male students without a disability when compared to those African American male students with learning disabilities?

3. What is the relationship of student self-perception of social skills and teachers' perception of student social skills for non-disabled, learning disabled and emotionally disturbed?

Results

There was not a significant difference in teacher ratings of ND vs. ED students in either social skills or problem behaviors. While there were significant differences in teacher ratings of social skills of ND vs. LD students, no significant differences were found when teachers rated ND vs. LD students on problem behaviors. Additionally, there were no significant relationships when comparing teacher vs. student ratings of social skills across groups (ND, ED or LD).

Discussion

No one study can address all school contextual variables important in the complex issue of special education referral and placement. However, while this study's small sample size is a limitation, some useful information has been provided by this study and can be the basis for future explorations of African American male student referral and placement in special education. In earlier studies, the SSRS Teacher form successfully discriminated the non-disabled from the disabled students in social skills and problem behaviors. However, in this study, when general education teachers were asked to use the SSRS to rate the levels of social skills and problem

behaviors of a group of mildly disabled African American male students in comparison to a control group of non-disabled African American male students, few differences were found. Specifically, teacher social skills ratings were not different for a ND sample of African American males when compared with a sample of African American males with ED.

In contrast, teachers rated the social skills of the LD group lower than the matched sample of GE African American males. Interestingly, when the mean for the SSRS norm sample was compared to the social skills ratings for LD and ND African American students, there were significant differences. It is suggested that the norm sample used to develop standards for the SSRS Teacher form - social skills subscale is different from the sample pool rated in this study. The question of instrument validity is repeated with analyses of additional findings from this study.

It is not certain from this study whether teacher perceptions were based on harbored stereotypes of African Americans. However, it is interesting that both students labeled as LD and the ND sample received significantly lower than average (i.e. a score of 100 is average) social skills ratings by their teachers. Perhaps, their ratings

were based on harbored stereotypes which were strengthened when the student was labeled (Prieto and Zucker, 1980).

Student Perception of Social Skills

In this study, there was not a significant relationship between student and teacher perception of social skills. While this reported lack of relationship could be due to small sample size, it also may reflect a difference in student and teacher perception of social skills. Comer (1988), for example, writes about the importance of bridging the communication gap between school and home as a way toward improved student achievement. The finding that teachers' ratings did not relate to students rating themselves could be representative of such a communication /culture gap between the teacher and student. Teachers, in other words, have expectations that are not clearly communicated to students and the African American students do not satisfy the teacher's expectations, which as Comer (1988) suggests, creates interaction conflicts. Such conflict could relate, in part, to placing African American male students at-risk for referral and subsequent placement into special education.

Problem Behaviors and Special Education Placement

When disabled ED and LD African American male students were compared to a control group of non-disabled African American male students on teacher perception of their problem behaviors, no differences were found between the disabled and the non-disabled groups in teachers ratings of problem behaviors. These findings are quite different from earlier studies which clearly distinguished the disabled from the non-disabled; particularly, the ED from the non-disabled (Gresham and MacMillan, 1997). These findings may reflect general education teachers' perception of African American male students, regardless of disability status, as threatening, aggressive and intimidating. This is consistent with Majors and Billson (1992) observations. Perhaps the findings reflect a conflict African American male students present to school in that they are "different" from what is expected in school systems (Sigmon, 1990). It also may reflect the impact of student ethnicity teachers' attitude, perception, expectations and special education referral of their students (Dunn, 1968; Rist, 1979; Cosden, 1990 and Majors and Billson, 1992).

Another possibility is that the SSRS Teacher form is not an appropriate instrument for distinguishing disabled from non-disabled African American male students. While the SSRS was chosen because it was the best instrument available to assess teacher perception of social skills, it may not have been appropriate for assessing the social skills of African American male students. In support of this notion, all the sample subgroups including the ND African American males were rated as evidencing more problem behaviors than the norm sample.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t for Non-Disabled vs. Students with Emotional Disturbances on the Dependent Measures.

Dependent Measures	**Student Groups**				
	Non-Disabled		Emotional Disturbance		t
	$\overline{X}$	SD	$\overline{X}$	SD	
Social Skills Ratings	94.50	12.41	92.70	17.07	.27 NS
Problem Behavior Ratings	109.20	11.16	116.70	9.39	1.63 NS

N= 20 (10 students per group)

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and t for Non-Disabled vs. Students with Learning Disabilities on the Dependent Measures.

Dependent Measures	**Student Groups**				
	Non-Disabled		Learning Disabilities		t
	$\overline{X}$	SD	$\overline{X}$	SD	
Social Skills Ratings	95.91	8.73	83.58	11.56	*2.95 sig.
Problem Behavior Ratings	109.50	10.71	116.91	12.92	1.53 NS

*$p < .05$; N= 24 (12 students per group)

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